

Toronto International Film Festival 2012

A comment from Robert Connolly, director of *Underground: The Julian Assange Story*

Joanne Laurier
6 November 2012

In our coverage of this year's Toronto International Film Festival, we took note of Robert Connolly's *Underground: The Julian Assange Story*. The work is a sympathetic portrait of someone who has been targeted by the US and other governments for his role in exposing their global criminality.

Drawing on material from an updated version of *Underground*, a work co-authored by Suelette Dreyfus and Assange, Connolly's film treats Assange's life as a young hacker in the late 1980s in Melbourne, Australia. As we wrote, "Connolly seeks to reconstruct the formative years of a talented teenager who developed into an adult determined to expose government malfeasance."

The film features a riveting performance by Alex Williams as Assange, as well outstanding work by Rachel Griffiths and Anthony LaPaglia.

Connolly, born in 1967, is best known for *The Bank* (2001), as well as *Balibo* (2009), a dramatization of the murder of five Australian reporters in East Timor by the Indonesian military in October 1975. He spoke to Richard Phillips of the WWSW at the time of that film's release

Connolly obviously concerns himself with some of the big problems of our time. He was kind enough to reply to a few questions by e-mail.

Joanne Laurier: Clearly, you are sympathetic to Julian Assange and disturbed about the great difficulties he now faces. Why did you choose this particular means of approaching his situation?

Robert Connolly: I've always been interested in the formation stories of significant people. What made the man or woman. I'm also very interested in how and when young people become politicised. This is very

relevant today.

In Australia, younger people are disillusioned with party politics and increasingly drawn to issue-based protest rather than any notion of the left and right of politics. I think the formative years of Julian Assange provide an interesting dramatic opportunity to explore this.

JL: The film seems to be quite detailed about this earlier period in Assange's life—where did the material come from? Is it based largely on the Dreyfus-Assange book, or other sorts of research?

RC: It's based firstly on the book *Underground*, and then beyond that on a range of discussions and research. I drew a lot on my experiences during that time.

JL: The film puts more of a human face on someone who is under attack by powerful forces and makes clear his strong sense of social justice at a young age. Do you see the film at least in part as an attempt to counter the media and government smear campaign?

RC: I think the human and personal side to any story is critical to better understand individuals who are significant figures in history. The media can generally speaking only present sound bite-like impressions of someone, distorting the more complex personal motivations and attitudes that inform their actions.

JL: What has been the response to the film in those venues you have shown it?

RC: The film has generated a huge amount of discussion. In Australia, it was a ratings triumph for Network Ten, viewed by 1.5 million people, and interestingly playing extremely well to a young demographic (18-39).

The level of discussion and media interest has been

terrific, and in many ways the film has transcended the historic detail to speak more broadly about activism and the power of the individual in the twenty-first century.



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